

TALKING
ABOUT

HYPOCRISY

WITH
YOUNG
PEOPLE

Adapted from:

*Can I Ask That?: 8 Hard Questions about
God & Faith*, Session 8

A resource from the Fuller Youth Institute

BIG IDEA

Students will explore their thoughts and feelings about the hypocrisy that exists in the church, the relevance of the book of James to followers' choices, and how best to respond to hypocrisy in themselves and others.

LEADER TIPS

- Questions or statements for you to say out loud are **bolded** in this guide. We've included other notes to consider as you prepare and lead this discussion.
- Resist the temptation to answer every question your teenagers pose. Sometimes it is best to ask them to think more about or to research questions on their own first.
- Be okay with saying the words, "I don't know." Be okay with occasional moments of awkward silence as well. Both are important when weighty matters are on the table.
- This session is written to help you, the leader, guide the discussion in such a way that honors the theological leaning of your particular tradition. You can eventually express your opinions, but we encourage you *not* to short-circuit the dialogue for students who might disagree.

YOU'LL NEED

- Your copy of this leader guide (if you are splitting into small groups, be sure each leader has a copy)
- A copy of the "Talk about it" handout for each participant
- A pencil or pen for each participant.

STEP 1: NOW

Honest discussion about what's happening today

Lead into the topic by reading out loud the opening scenarios on the "Talk about it" handout. Invite different students to read different statements. Give students time between each reading to write a short response—and assure them it's okay if they don't get to complete their thoughts. The point is to get the conversation started by introducing a few viewpoints they might hear from others, or might wonder themselves.

TALK ABOUT IT

Pretend some friends posted statements like the ones below.

Write your own short response in the comment boxes under each post.



Vicki: My teacher today talked about the ways slave owners in the South cited passages in the Bible to justify keeping slaves. This was just one more example to me of how Christians have done terrible things. I sometimes wonder if the world would be a better place if there were no religions. Think about how many religious wars there've been!

Reply



Post



Jeremy: I'm embarrassed by the stupid things some people have done who claimed to be Christians. Having said that, I guess I've done some pretty dumb things too. You know, we all need forgiveness. I just wish people could separate the teachings of Jesus from the bad things some of his followers do. I'm sad people are missing out on following Jesus because they get stuck on Christians' failures.

Reply



Post



Henry: I'm tired of people saying that Christians are bad. Are you kidding me? Without Christians, the entire world as we know it would be a mess. Civilizations that have looked to Jesus as their source of ethics are far more advanced in human rights than civilizations that haven't. I am happy to defend the record of Christians.

Reply



Post



Trina: I see that Christians have done some terrible things. I also see they have done wonderful things. Because of that, I don't understand why Christianity is necessary to live a good life. Some of the most ethical, wonderful people I know are not Christians. Shouldn't we just love each other whether someone is a Christian or not? I don't see the need to follow any religion, because I can be ethical all by myself without any help.

Reply



Post

DISCUSSION

Q: Whose statement (Vicki's, Jeremy's, Henry's, or Trina's) have you heard most from other people?

Q: Who do you relate to most—Vicki, Jeremy, Henry, or Trina?

Q: What are some of the disappointing—if not downright wrong—acts done by Christians throughout our history? What about today?

Depending on what they've studied and their grade level, students might mention the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the killing of Native Americans, or slavery. Depending on your group, our current political climate is also likely to come up now in this discussion. You may want to be prepared for how to field those kinds of comments in a way that listens without allowing direct attacks.

While some individuals or groups of Christians have indeed done really terrible things (sometimes in Jesus' name), it's important to point out that we need to be careful with one-sided arguments. For example, while some Christians have used the Bible to continue the practice of slavery or harm other people, others have used the Bible as their ultimate justification for fighting those same things. At times Christians have led the way in helping others, including founding hospitals and eventually healthcare systems.

Q: When have you thought before about the reality that followers of Jesus are sometimes hypocrites, meaning we say one thing but sometimes do the opposite?

Your group may bring up more recent examples of those who claim to be Christians who have done wrong, or they might talk about hypocrisy among people their age.

Q: Perhaps you've heard this phrase or seen this bumper sticker: "Christians aren't perfect—just forgiven." What's helpful about that phrase? What can be misunderstood about it?

STEP 2: NEW

Fresh perspective from Scripture

Say something along these lines to lead into the text:

Jesus used the word “hypocrite” in his ministry. The word hypocrite means an actor, or someone wearing a mask. Jesus uses that word 17 times in the New Testament. He constantly criticized religious followers and leaders who said one thing, but did another. So sometimes it’s totally appropriate to call out hypocrisy for what it is.

The book of James in the New Testament stresses the importance of not just knowing about the way of Jesus. James encourages us to actually live like we know Jesus.

Project the passage or have students look it up in Bibles:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

—James 1:22-25

Q: How is forgetting what you look like in a mirror similar to hearing God’s word but not doing what it says?

Q: What are the connections between this passage and any hypocrisy you are aware of right now?

Q: How does following God’s “perfect law” bring freedom?

You may need to help students see the connections between James’ mention of the law and the gospel “that gives freedom,” because of the grace we have through Jesus.

Q: What type of “blessings” do you think come when we don’t forget what we’ve heard but instead live it out?

STEP 3: HOW

Fresh insights for life today

Transition toward helping students respond to the tensions raised by others' hypocrisy and their own. You may want to choose from the following talking points and questions based on your group, how much time you have, and the nature of your discussion so far:

- Jesus had a lot to say about how we live our lives. A disciple is someone who follows “the way” of someone else. Jesus invited us to be his disciples. What does it look like to walk in the way of Jesus? **What does it mean to walk with integrity rather than hypocrisy?**
- Galatians 5:22 describes the fruit of someone who follows Jesus and is being transformed by the Holy Spirit. **How do our lives produce this kind of fruit? What can we do when we don't see fruit in ourselves or others?**
- Help release students from the pressure to defend the acts of some Christians that are completely indefensible. Instead of defending the actions of Christians who have done evil, it is often best to agree that those actions don't represent Jesus.
- Mahatma Gandhi once said of Christianity: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” **Is it possible to change the perception of Christians that many unchurched people have? How?**
- **Looking back at the statements we read at the start, who would you most want to respond to now, and what would you say?** Project the passage or have students look it up in Bibles.

PRAYER

Close by praying in a way that repents for the hypocrisy of the church broadly and our own personal hypocrisy, while leaning into the grace and restoration of God available to us all. You might say:

When we make mistakes—even big ones—Jesus has given us a way to respond. 1 John 1:9 assures us, “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Confession, which just means telling the truth, is a way to be honest before God about the ways we have blown it.

Let's pray prayers of confession together; I'll give you prompts and you can respond silently:

- **God, we confess that your church across the centuries has sometimes done wrong—even evil—things in your name. Forgive us ...**
- **We also confess that your church today, even our own local church, has sometimes done wrong. We often miss the mark of what you want, sometimes even when we know it's wrong. Forgive us ...**
- **We confess our personal hypocrisy to you, too—all the ways we've disobeyed you, denied you, or ignored you and gone our own way. Forgive us ...**

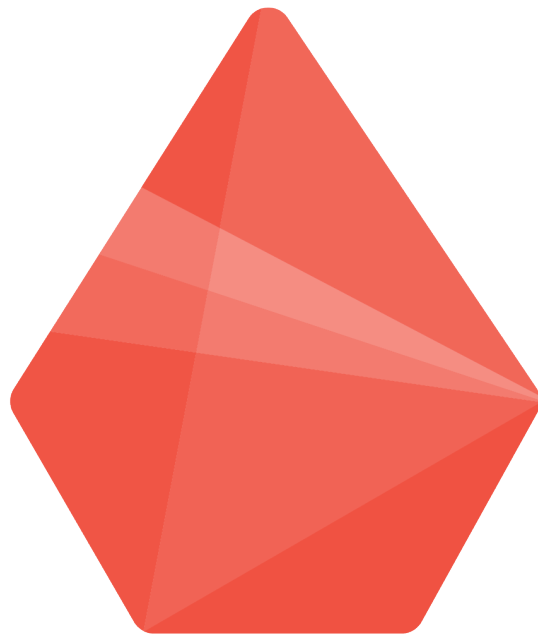
In the Christian tradition alone, grace is about God's unstoppable love that both forgives and restores us to right relationship with God. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven—we are forgiven—and restored.

May God give us courage to seek restoration with one another when we have been those who have caused hurt.

God, we are grateful for your faithfulness to be with us even when we wander from your way, and your grace to forgive and transform us when we return to you. Help us live in the power of that grace this week. In Jesus' name, Amen.

As students go, encourage them that a life lived in honor of Jesus Christ is a witness to the world of who Jesus really is. We all have the opportunity to live that kind of witness each day, no matter how many times we've failed in the days before.

For more resources to help address hard questions with students, see *Can I Ask That, Volumes 1 and 2*, available **here** in the fulleryouthinstitute.org store.



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